

## **Forrest, George US Army**

[00:00:14.12] GEORGE FORREST: Born April 13, 1938, in a small town in Southern Maryland-- Leonardtown, which is the county seat of the mother county of Maryland. I have three brothers, one sister. My parents are both deceased. But I am one of these fortunate guys who got an opportunity to live to see my father reach 97 years of age. And my mother reached 95 before they passed.

[00:00:53.35] My grandmother on my father's side lived to be 104. So I come from a good gene pool. I grew up in a segregated town. St. Mary's County-- probably more South than any other county in the state. In fact, I went to a segregated high school.

[00:01:23.12] And that's not a bad thing, because in St. Mary's most of the schools are named after the town that they're located in-- for example, Leonardtown High School. Great Mills High School is located in Great Mills. But four of the high schools are named after African Americans. My high school, which is named Benjamin Banneker, there's a George Washington Carver located in the southern part of Maryland,

[00:01:52.91] there's a Mary McLeod Bethune, which is located in the seventh district. And there's a high school that's named after my father, the Dr. James A. Forrest High School. He was a man for all seasons. He grew up in a single-parented family. His mother married and left him to grow up in St. Mary's with his grandmother.

[00:02:27.39] And she put him in a boarding school, which was run by a doctor-- a PhD-- from Haiti. And this guy instilled in my father the value of education. And so when he graduated from high school, he matriculated to Hampton Institute, which is now Hampton University, where he studied agriculture.

[00:02:57.00] But his high school professor-- and he used to call him Professor Daniels-- told him that in order for you to thrive and survive, you need an education. And so this is the trait that I think he instilled in all of his children. All of my brothers are college graduates.

[00:03:19.48] My sister, who is probably the smartest one of us all and the most athletic-- she went to an HBC, Bowie State. And my mother had what we call our shrine, where we had all of our trophies and whatever because both my youngest brother and my oldest brother and my middle brother all played athletics or participated in athletics.

[00:03:53.22] My sister-- in the middle of this shrine that my mother has created, there's a plaque. And it's for the Athlete of the Decade, which is my sister, who lettered in basketball, in track, in tennis, and volleyball. So she was-- and my father had-- back in the day there were-- baseball-- baseball was a high priority among-- so my father had a baseball diamond.

[00:04:30.82] My sister played second base on our team, the Leonardtown Yankees. So although I grew up in a segregated community, there were some advantages to that. We had our own businesses. My father worked hard to make sure that education was the focus of all of our lives.

[00:05:03.21] MARK FRANKLIN: Did you play on that baseball team?

[00:05:04.62] GEORGE FORREST: I played on that baseball team. I was the catcher. My brother was a pitcher. My sister was a second baseman. And my oldest brother was first base.

[00:05:20.14] GEORGE FORREST: That's an interesting story. My father was also very clever. And so in the summertime, he would get us jobs that were labor intensive. And if you know anything about tobacco, because St. Mary's was the tobacco-growing county in Maryland, so he would put us to work in the fields. And there were guys who were on those tobacco crews who were old men, at least in my mind.

[00:05:53.83] And I said, this is not where I want to be when I'm in my 30s or 40s or 50s. So he took me to Hampton to look around as one of the potential schools. But at that time, Hampton was an agricultural school. And I drove on to the campus-- or we drove on to the campus-- and there were cows grazing off in the distance. And I said, this is not for me.

[00:06:27.11] So then we went to Baltimore. And in the days to get to Morgan, you had to go up Pennsylvania Avenue, which was the Harlem of Baltimore. There were nightclubs and entertainment and whatever. And I said, this is probably more to my liking. [LAUGHS] So that's how I ended up in college.

[00:06:49.54] My first year, I did reasonably well because my high school was strong academically. So the first year was a breeze for me. I made the mistake of being cavalier about education. So the second year, I had some difficulty. But because I was an athlete and I played football, I had a coach-- his name was Eddie Hurt-- who used to make sure that we got into the most difficult classes.

[00:07:22.04] I must have taken freshman English at least three times. [LAUGHS] In those days, the first two times, they would give you an incomplete. The third time, if you didn't pass, they gave you a ticket to go home. I was in ROTC. Morgan has a strong ROTC program. In fact-- and I'll probably get a chance to talk about their ROTC program maybe later on-- but when I was in college, there were opportunities for career enhancement were if you wanted to be a teacher, or you could be an undertaker, or you could go in the military.

[00:08:06.05] And so the military seemed the most exciting for me because of the opportunity to travel and all of that sort of stuff. So I was commissioned second lieutenant and then went to Fort Benning, went through basic, and my first duty assignment was at Fort Ord, California.

[00:08:29.92] And back in the day, Fort Ord was going through a reorganization to the pentomic concept, so I was in a battle group commanded by an African American. His name was Roy Burley. And he was the hardest guy that I ever worked for. And I thought at first he didn't like me. But what he was doing was psyching me out to make sure that I made it.

[00:09:00.94] But San Francisco was just up the road. And so we spent-- the routine on the weekends were we'd do Saturday morning inspection. That would be over by noon or so. We'd

jump in our cars and drive to San Francisco, stay up there all weekend, and try to get back early Sunday morning before reveille.

[00:09:30.75] MARK FRANKLIN: So let's go back a little bit. When did you graduate college and when were you commissioned?

[00:09:36.57] GEORGE FORREST: I finished in 1960. But rewarding college experience for me because I had an opportunity to play football. And I played for one of the-- at that time, there are some famous African American coaches-- Eddie Robinson at Grambling and Eddie Hurt at Morgan because, at one point, he had won over 140 some-odd games without a loss.

[00:10:06.72] The first time we lost a game in the four years that I played, we lost to Howard. And so the football enhanced my ability to be able to maneuver through the military.

[00:10:29.68] GEORGE FORREST: I was in the class with West Pointers. So they had this knack of being able to negotiate through because-- the most difficult courses for me were land navigation and marksmanship because I had a great deal of difficulty of-- hitting a target. [LAUGHS] There is a term that I couldn't hit a bull in the butt with a bass fiddle.

[00:10:58.53] But because of the class that I was in, met some really neat guys and got an opportunity to serve with some of those guys later on. Went to airborne school-- graduated from that with the minimum number of jumps-- and then went on to Fort Ord.

[00:11:19.69] MARK FRANKLIN: Do you think that training prepared you for what you were going to see in Vietnam?

[00:11:24.19] GEORGE FORREST: I got that preparation. And the first platoon sergeant that I worked for-- and worked for, that's not a misstatement-- was a guy named Sergeant Metty. Because back in the day, the company commander had the ability to promote and demote.

[00:11:52.96] And Sergeant Metty was a hard-drinking, hell-raising kind of NCO that's missing from the Army today. I'm not sure, but I don't think there are any Sergeant Mettys in the Army today. But he had gone all the way up to E-7 and had been busted all the way back down to private. And when I met him, he was an E-5.

[00:12:14.53] And he said to me when I first signed into the platoon, he said, Lieutenant, if you listen to me-- and the operative word is listen-- you don't have to do everything that I tell you to do, but I'm not going to tell you anything wrong. And I'm going to make you the best officer that I can possibly make you. And what he taught me was, number one, mission first, troops first, and to be able to balance that.

[00:12:47.34] And he had this knack of-- he could go into the platoon and wear them out. And then on the other hand, he could go into the platoon and give them so much praise that they would do anything for him. And that's what made me a reasonably successful company commander because always in the back of my mind I could hear Metty saying, listen, teach, don't preach.

[00:13:17.25] Then I went to Fort Riley, Kansas. I was in the 1st Infantry Division. And we were deployed to REFORGER. This was in the early '60s, and we were part of the Berlin Airlift. My battalion was stationed at Wildflecken to do our initial in-country orientation, and then we went to Berlin.

[00:13:50.90] And so I worked in G-2 as a intelligence gatherer. And what we would do is, there was an agreement between the Warsaw Pact and NATO that we could go into their areas and try to get as close to their maneuvers. And they would do the same thing for us. So we did that for a number of years. And then out of the blue, I get a letter from DA that you've been reassigned to the 3rd US Infantry. And I'm going, what do they do? And once I did my research, I found out that they were the Presidential Honor Guard.

[00:14:39.22] Back early in the military, although it was integrated, there was some kind of unwritten rule that only one African American officer at a time in the unit. So when I got there, the guy who was there before me was leaving. And I was his replacement. And so I was assigned to B Company, 1st Battalion, 3rd US Infantry, the Old Guard.

[00:15:08.22] MARK FRANKLIN: Wow.

[00:15:09.22] GEORGE FORREST: And I stayed there until-- well, I was in B Company. And then I made first lieutenant. And then I moved to Honor Guard, where I had the privilege of commanding the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, which was the most humbling experience that I have ever-- well, maybe humbling is not a good word to describe it.

[00:15:36.96] But you had to sign a code of conduct. You had to be a certain height. You had to wear-- you couldn't weigh more than this number of pounds. And very stringent code of conduct. And these guys-- once you serve on the Tomb, you're a Tomb guard for life. Now, I never walked the mat, because officers don't do that. But I commanded that platoon.

[00:16:03.93] And I was in the Old Guard for Kennedy's funeral. I was there for Omar Bradley's funeral. I was there for MacArthur's funeral.

[00:16:17.79] MARK FRANKLIN: What years were you there?

[00:16:19.08] GEORGE FORREST: '61 to about '64.

[00:16:25.50] MARK FRANKLIN: At that time, did you have any sense of what was going on in Vietnam or what the Vietnam conflict was all about?

[00:16:29.79] GEORGE FORREST: No idea. And this is how I got to Vietnam. GEORGE FORREST: I made captain while I was there. And my company commander had moved on, and he was the assignment officer in infantry branch. And this guy's name was Ken Pond. And he called me one day. And he said, you can stay in the Old Guard if you want. But if you want to be successful in the military, you need combat experience.

[00:17:02.45] And there is a new unit at Fort Benning that's the 11th Air Assault, and I'm going to get you assigned to that unit. And he did. And when I got there, there were no vacancies for company commanders. So they assigned me to G-3 Air in the 2nd Brigade. I only stayed there until the 11th Air Assault changed over and became the 1st Cav Airmobile

[00:17:33.56] We did some training in South Carolina. And then we got orders to deploy. In early August, we boarded ships in Charleston, South Carolina. We loaded on to a World II troop ship, the USS *Buckner*. And we sailed from-- USS *Buckner*-- we sailed from Charleston through the Panama Canal.

[00:18:02.72] We were supposed to stop in Long Beach for refueling, but continued on. Because once you leave-- the rule was once you left the States, your tour began. So the first 24, 25 days of my first Vietnam tour began once we left Charleston. So we were on that ship for-- and this turned me against cruises. [LAUGHS].

[00:18:35.90] Yeah, I've got to tell you, it was awful because between boredom and Soldiers being sick, it was not a pleasant 26 days. I think we left around the-- and my dates, when you become vintage, dates and time seems to be-- it's like stories. Whenever we are telling war stories, they get embellished by the number of beers you have and the number of absence of witnesses who can refute.

[00:19:14.61] [LAUGHTER]

[00:19:15.93] So probably less than a month-- less than a month. And so when we landed, we landed in Qui Nhon, convoyed up to An Khe, and started to work on-- because we had to develop the base. And so my company's occupation of the perimeter-- and the perimeter was called the Green Line-- and so in the daytime, we would come back to the unit, get our individual areas squared away, and then at night, we would go out and occupy the Green Line.

[00:19:59.31] MARK FRANKLIN: So what date did you arrive in Vietnam?

[00:20:02.03] GEORGE FORREST: Late August of '65.

[00:20:06.20] MARK FRANKLIN: What were your impressions when you got off the ship?

[00:20:08.21] GEORGE FORREST: I said, why are we here? Because it was hot. We didn't have jungle boots. We didn't have jungle fatigues. We had Corcoran jump boots, whatever, and just regular fatigues. And so they were uncomfortable. And we didn't have Kevlar helmets. We had those old heavy helmets that weighed more than your backpack.

[00:20:46.27] I was the company commander of A Company, 1st of the 5th. Well, the first duty was, when we got there, get your area squared away so that the troops would have someplace to hang their hats. The next thing was to make sure that we got a lot of in-country training. We did maneuvers and went on patrols, just to acclimate guys to how much water they needed, how much ammunition they could carry.

[00:21:24.79] There was this misnomer-- or there was this misconception-- that because we were in a helicopter unit that we didn't have to carry our own stuff. And so you had to convince guys that you carry as much as you can and you use that frugally. Because if the helicopters don't come, and you use all your ammunition, you're SOL-- out of luck.

[00:22:05.90] GEORGE FORREST: Other than the rain-- because I think we probably got there just at the tail end of the rainy season. And so the company streets were always mud. We didn't have the best rations, initially. It took some time for them to get oriented to what the needs were. But not uncomfortable, not something that was unexpected, because where we trained in South Carolina the weather and the terrain was probably a close representation.

[00:22:48.33] And that's why they chose that area. It was along the Pee Dee River-- the big Pee Dee River, which is think it runs between North and South Carolina. So the conditions and the environment were not that unusual. We made some mistakes. Probably one of them-- and we used to get rockets at night.

[00:23:13.18] And we finally figured out that those guys that we were hiring to cut the brush around the perimeter were also doing range finding for key locations within the perimeter. So we finally wised up to that and started being more cautious about who we hired. But again, not unbearable-- just uncomfortable, but not unbearable.

[00:23:45.11] MARK FRANKLIN: Did you have much time for yourself? And if you did, what you do in your off-duty time?

[00:23:49.22] GEORGE FORREST: Not really. Well, I did seven day R&R to Hong Kong. But I only went to Hong Kong because I could get suits made and whatever.

[00:24:01.73] MARK FRANKLIN: Do you have any specific memories of the popular culture? For instance, what I mean by that is books, music, or songs. Do you hear a song today from that era that takes you back to that time?

[00:24:12.14] GEORGE FORREST: Of course. Of course. Because the music-- I am a lover of blues. And I came to this because my father, who also was-- and my father will come up in this conversation all the time because he is the individual who made the most impact on my life.

[00:24:47.09] And I am still striving to try to get to where he was. And so this love of blues grew out of a hatred of blues because blues is all about my wife left me, and my dog bit me, and I'm downtrodden, and whatever.

[00:25:11.88] But it is the root of all of the music of America-- country and western, bluegrass, rock and roll, R&B, and even jazz. Some of the jazz structure of their music comes from the rhythms of blues. And this dates back to our ancestors, who brought this kind of music-- not so much the sound, but the rhythms.

[00:25:50.13] And so in my waning years, I am spending my kids' inheritance by going to blues festivals.

[00:26:02.36] MARK FRANKLIN: Good for you.

[00:26:03.30] GEORGE FORREST: Yeah. So this is-- and I have had the pleasure of meeting some of the giants of blues. I mean, I've met BB King, and Bobby Blue Bland, and just it goes on-- Pinetop Perkins and all of these guys who are legends-- also went to where Robert Johnson is supposed to have sold his soul to the devil at the crossroads in Alabama.

[00:26:33.52] And so in my old age and in my retirement age, if I had known that it was as much fun-- because I'm having fun now-- I would have done it 50 years earlier.

[00:26:49.88] MARK FRANKLIN: Describe any memorable holidays that you experienced over there in Vietnam and what made them memorable for you.

[00:26:55.07] GEORGE FORREST: Yeah. My mother was a caring person but did not understand. Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter, because my parents were Catholic, were the three big holidays. But the Christmas one was the most. And so for Christmas, I would get these packages with cakes that she baked and shipped and did not realize that it took 30 days for the cake to get to Vietnam.

[00:27:32.50] So when I got the cake, the only thing that it was good for was to throw it at the VC. [LAUGHS]. But these are the memories of the holidays that I have. But we never did anything special. I mean, after the Battle of the Ia Drang, which was around Thanksgiving, they gave us turkey. But it wasn't-- after that, it wasn't one-- too much of a holiday.

[00:28:06.89] GEORGE FORREST: Within my unit, the 1st of the 5th that was commanded by Colonel Ackerman, pretty close. I mean, I was in the Bravo Company. The guy who commanded that was Tully. I knew those guys, rather than the guys that I was on that stage with last night.

[00:28:36.83] And the beauty of the company was I had some excellent NCOs. These guys were-- they were carbon copies of what Metty was. I mean, I had guys like Sergeant Rodgers, and Sergeant Vaught, and Freddie Owens, who-- my first sergeant had been in Korea-- and so his ability to handle guys--

[00:29:11.09] The most unique guy in the company was my supply sergeant, Sergeant Reed. And because Qui Nhon was the port of entry for all stuff, he used to go down there with a Jeep and would come back with a deuce and a half-- with a 2 and 1/2 ton truck-- full of-- my company was the only company with a generator.

[00:29:39.04] We had the metal PSP, which is a metal strip that's used for aircraft landing. And so we were able to put those down. I mean, this guy was amazing. I mean, if he couldn't find it, it wasn't in country. And so these are the kind of guys that help make your company successful.

[00:30:03.43] MARK FRANKLIN: Did you form friendships, relationships with folks from other racial or social backgrounds that you might not otherwise have done had you not joined the Army?

[00:30:11.05] GEORGE FORREST: Yeah, because I was the only African American company commander in the battalion. So the guys that I knew or met-- my growing up around white people and having gone to a historically black college, I hadn't quite figured out-- my first real exposure to professional white people who treated me equally was when I got in the military.

[00:30:46.75] And so the beauty of my guys-- they didn't care what color I was, what religion I believed, what my political persuasions were. All they worried about was can I trust this guy to get me out of this situation or not put me in a situation where I'm going to lose everything? And that's the beauty of multiculturalism.

[00:31:16.80] I think one of the problems with the world today and particularly with this great nation-- and it is a great nation-- is that it's all about me. Without-- and I'll use as an example, my sons don't know or didn't know segregation, because they lived on military bases. So to bring a white child home was not a big issue.

[00:31:51.05] When I was growing up, if you brought a white person into my mother's house, my mother-- her guard would go up because what is this person doing in my house? And what does she want from me-- which was a different approach from the guys in my company. My XO was a Citadel graduate, born and raised in Southern Georgia, and did not have a prejudiced bone in his body.

[00:32:23.73] And you asked about relationships. After I retired, his father left him a florist business and tickets to Georgia Tech. So every year, we would go down to Georgia Tech football games, particularly when they played Virginia Tech, because my second son played football at Virginia Tech.

[00:32:53.27] I spoke at his funeral. I was the godfather of his son. And so the lack of this mutual exchange. And let me just become the old philosopher that I think that I am. I have never believed that America was a melting pot. OK?

[00:33:25.42] My thought process-- and this is based on what my father has said-- it's more like a salad. There are tomatoes, and there's lettuce and whatever else you want-- bacon, whatever. None of those ingredients lose their individual identity. The only time you know that they are mixed is when you put that sauce. And in our case, that sauce is democracy.

[00:34:00.05] And so unlike a melting pot where you create this stew, and you don't know if it's carrots or peas or whatever. So I used to do some motivational speaking back in the day. And so I used to tell guys, particularly young African American guys, you have got to be multidimensional. You have got to be-- you have to develop these chameleon-like qualities that will allow you on wherever environment you are. It's about survival because if you don't survive, you can't thrive.

[00:34:50.05] GEORGE FORREST: The first tour was hands on. I was the end all to be all. I mean, I made sure that they got their mail. I made sure that they had dry socks and three cots. And I was responsible for their safety.



[00:35:09.35] MARK FRANKLIN: What about your leaders?

[00:35:10.67] GEORGE FORREST: From the battalion commander down to the S-3-- excellent, excellent, excellent. The only weak one in that chain of command was the S-1. But the S-4, the communications guy, they were all professional. Whenever I was with my battalion, I always felt comfortable because I knew that I could count on getting the stuff that I need-- getting the guidance that I needed.

[00:35:49.84] Whenever I got in trouble, I was always attached to somebody else because they didn't know who I was. And their preference was to take care of their guys first. This is how I ended up in the situation that caused me to lose 17 precious human beings because of poor leadership.

[00:36:23.92] I still to this day don't know why I was separated from my unit because the commander called us all forward to get a briefing when I have communications with him, I have radios. We could have-- so I'm away from my unit.

[00:36:47.29] MARK FRANKLIN: What was your unit's mission and role in Vietnam?

[00:36:52.56] GEORGE FORREST: Close with, kill, capture as many of them before they could kill you.

[00:36:57.87] MARK FRANKLIN: And how would you do that? What type of operations would you conduct to do that?

[00:37:01.41] GEORGE FORREST: Search and destroy. We would go out, try to find the bad guys, capture them if we could, and kill them before they could kill you.

[00:37:19.26] GEORGE FORREST: Well, the first ones were search-and-destroy operations. There was an area south of An Khe, and the nickname for it was Happy Valley because nothing ever happened in that valley. And so it was probably along the main highway that connected Qui Nhon to on An Khe, and then on to Pleiku, in the Central Highlands.

[00:37:51.30] I remember we used to-- because there was a river that ran through it, so we used to have to do river-crossing operations, which was kind of new to us because we didn't do that a lot in South Carolina. So it was a bit tricky. But we kind of figured it out and got it together.

[00:38:16.32] My first casualty was-- or the first casualty in my unit was we were in a perimeter-- a night perimeter. And at night, the company always has a password. So when somebody approaches the perimeter, you challenge him for a response.

[00:38:45.31] Well, this kid went out of the perimeter to use the latrine and forgot the password. And so when he attempted to come back in, they shot him. He didn't survive, which kind of haunted me for a long time because I often wonder what a commander can do to keep his guys safe.

[00:39:17.98] But one of the things that Joe told me is you can't always get it right. There are going to be glitches. And they're there for a purpose to make sure you don't repeat because you don't get a do-over. If he dies, he's dead. And so you wonder-- at least I did--

[00:39:50.25] I wonder what I could have done to make sure that the guys on that perimeter were so skilled that they could recognize his voice. But that's impossible to do because people can imitate, whatever. So the best practice was in place. It just didn't function the way that it should have been.

[00:40:22.87] MARK FRANKLIN: It wasn't perfect.

[00:40:23.38] GEORGE FORREST: And to assess blame-- the guy who shot him lived with that because they were foxhole buddies. And so that's-- but on to the question. One of the operations that we were on was when the Koreans first came into Vietnam, they were located south of An Khe and were convoying up through the Deo Mang Pass, which we were providing security for.

[00:41:02.38] We had outposts on-- along that pass. And that was-- my company's responsibility was for convoy security. It was also the main route to get supplies from Qui Nhon up to An Khe and then on to Pleiku. So our role along the highway was to outpost. And we were stationed on observation points where we could view the highway.

[00:41:25.87] The highway kind of twist and turns. And if you-- you probably know this highway. It's notorious for ambushes. So we were there to forestall any of that kind of activity. The next major operation was that I got a call from my battalion that there was a battle going on out west of Pleiku that needed reinforcements.

[00:41:57.93] So they sent-- my battalion called me and said to assemble your troops at this pickup zone. And we will send CH-47, which is the Chinook-- two Chinooks to carry out your company, maybe three. I can't remember what the troop capacity for those were. But a number of Chinooks came, and they picked us up.

[00:42:31.67] They didn't tell me or have maps that I could determine-- the maps that I got were from the pilots flying the Chinooks. So we went into an LZ called Columbus-- an unprepared LZ with CH-47s. We offloaded.

[00:43:04.34] My battalion commander did not communicate to Hal Moore's battalion that we were in Columbus. So we landed there and got no hostile fire. Spent the night. The next morning, I got up. I got a call from my battalion commander who said move four clicks, three clicks to the west, and you will run into Hal Moore's battalion.

[00:43:39.78] Well, that was the first day or the second morning of their major fight. And so we walked into LZ X-ray not knowing what the hell was going on in there. And when I got there, Hal Moore pulled me up and said, who and where did you come from?

[00:44:08.76] And I said, my boss told me to march two clicks to the west, and here I am. And so he immediately put me into the line. And that day and the next day was among the heaviest

fighting. I didn't know Hal Moore from-- I knew of his reputation. But I didn't-- I had no clue of what I was taking my guys into until we got there.

[00:44:47.96] GEORGE FORREST: The morning of the third day, he told me that there are some wounded and dead Americans-- that you needed to push the perimeter out and recover as many bodies as you can. And that's what we did. I don't remember the numbers, but it was a lot.

[00:45:13.40] GEORGE FORREST: Not in that battle, but in the ensuing battle-- that was my worst day.

[00:45:20.66] MARK FRANKLIN: Let's talk about that.

[00:45:21.47] GEORGE FORREST: The morning of the third day, he called us all in and said, listen, they're going to put B-52 strikes on this Chu Pong Mountain, which was-- wherever the headquarters for the 33rd and 66th NVA regiments were. So the rule was that there had to be a three kilometer safety box that you need to get out.

[00:45:50.27] Hal Moore's battalion got to ride out. They sent Colonel Tully's battalion in. They walked out. They sent Colonel McDade's battalion in and attached me to the 2nd of the 7th. That morning he gave me the march order and that I was going to be the rear guard.

[00:46:24.36] Well, I said, here we go again. This is not going to work well for me. So I had, fortunately for me with good NCOs, they said to me, Sir, we've been fighting for two and half days now. The troops are tired. But we still cannot be undisciplined or lack vision. We have to be prepared for anything.

[00:46:59.23] And so we put out the normal march security. In my mind, it was not an administrative march. I think for the guys up ahead of me, they believed it was an administrative march to go from point A to point B and set up the perimeter.

[00:47:23.85] My first question was, why are we walking out of here? This is an airmobile unit. There are supposed to be enough helicopters to get us all out. Well, apparently there wasn't. And this is all in hindsight because at the time, I didn't know McDade from John Doe. I didn't know what his qualifications were.

[00:47:55.00] All I knew is if he was a battalion commander, I assumed that he knew what the hell he was doing. And so to my dismay, when we got at least outside of the B-52 safety box, he called all of the commanders forward to LZ Albany, where he was going to apparently give us the instructions on where to deploy our troops.

[00:48:34.60] So I left my company with my XO, who just happened to be-- he had come in that morning to join us because we were supposed to be going back. And I think he brought the mail out. I think that was the reason that he came out. Because he was not with us when we left the highway. But he ended up in the area.

[00:49:03.58] And so I went forward with my two operators-- guy named Jimmy Smith and Hurst. And so we went about, maybe, 600 yards up the trail. And going up this trail, I saw Soldiers sitting on their packs, smoking, relaxed.

[00:49:32.35] Because they were-- obviously, Colonel McDade did not have intel about what was going on in the area. We had assumed-- and this is all in hindsight. I'm painting a picture now that I didn't have privilege to at the time. I'm assuming that he had no idea of what was left of the remnants of the battle at X-ray, because these guys coming down were reinforcements for the guys who had fought the two days on X-ray.

[00:50:13.67] Well, when we get up the trail about, maybe, 200 meters from the command post, all hell breaks loose. There's mortar fire. There's small arms fire. And since I didn't know who or what or how to contact these guys, I decided out of survival and safety to get to a safe place, which was back there with Shorty Rodgers, and Sergeant Vaught, and Lieutenant Hess, and Larry Martel, and Jim Patchwall. These were all the guys-- these were all my guys.

[00:51:12.97] And so I got up from our position and started to maneuver my way back down this trail. Now, as a company commander, your shadow are your radio operators. There's one on the battalion net, and there's one on the company net. And these were my two guys.

[00:51:40.55] So when I turned to go, I knew that they were going to be right there with me lugging those heavy PRC-25s. Unfortunately, and this is where this gets really hard for me, because I don't know if I left them behind. And so when I get back to my position, they're not there.

[00:52:20.94] And so the question in my mind is, did I leave them? And I found out that they were killed as we were negotiating our way back to my position. I will not have the answer to that question ever. And these were two 19-year-old kids who-- no telling what they could have been.

[00:53:07.36] And I'm getting a little melodramatic here. But this is why commanders often wonder, why didn't I catch a bullet? What made me so special that they missed me? And I was a couple of inches taller than either of these two kids.

[00:53:37.53] But you can't-- once you get to your position, the training kicks in. I can't lament the fact that I don't have all of my guys or that 17 of my people have been killed. I got 93 more that I have to do something to make sure that they're safe. And so when I get back, I found out that my XO has been wounded, my 1st Platoon leader has been killed, my 1st Platoon sergeant has been killed. The FO has been wounded. And chaos reigned in that environment.

[00:54:24.85] MARK FRANKLIN: Did you have backup radios? Because if you lost your radio operators, the you have--

[00:54:29.50] GEORGE FORREST: What I did was cannibalize and took radios from the platoons and then just put them-- but I didn't have-- the only net that I had was my battalion because McDade's was offline. There were no communications between McDade and my-- so I

called my battalion commander and said, we're in a hell of a situation here. I've got wounded guys. I've got dead guys.

[00:55:07.70] I'm out here by myself, essentially. And so he then started to send in medevac helicopters to get my wounded guys out. I think we got most of them out. But unfortunately, we didn't. So we created a perimeter like we always do. And we put out the necessary flanks.

[00:55:40.84] And at about midnight, there's a call on my radio from a call sign Ghost 4-6. And we don't know if the enemy has captured our radios, and they are on our net. So I turn to Sergeant Kluge, who had taken over the command of the 1st Platoon, who Larry Hess, who is from the hometown of the guy you just interviewed, Gettysburg.

[00:56:23.42] And Sergeant Kluge was his platoon sergeant. And so my first sergeant was wounded. My top sergeant was wounded. So I said-- and Ghost 4-6 was saying there are a number of wounded guys out here in the kill zone of the ambush who need to be evacuated. So I said to Sergeant Kluge, I need to go out there and get those guys because some of them may be my people.

[00:56:56.24] And he said, Sir, you can't go John Wayne on me and go out to try to save a couple of guys when you don't even know what's out there. So he volunteered to take my medic. And the medic's name is Daniel Torrez, Hispanic guy, best-- he could have been-- listen, if medics become doctors and become brain surgeons, Daniel Torrez would have been one of those guys.

[00:57:33.82] When they got out there-- I only sent out a squad with maybe three or four stretchers. When they got out there, they found that there were more-- there were more guys than they had stretchers to bring back. So Torrez went around and found the most critically wounded guys that he could and loaded them on to the stretchers.

[00:58:02.95] Well, we couldn't leave enough-- we couldn't leave guys because we needed the stretcher bearers. So Kluge and the stretcher bearers left Daniel Torrez, the medic, in the kill zone to treat the most wounded that we couldn't get out.

[00:58:28.72] The longest night of my life, because when they came back in to the perimeter, we had omitted giving the password to everybody. So there was some more shooting at guys coming in with stretchers because, I mean, we have been in a chaotic situation. There was confusion.

[00:59:00.10] Fortunately, none of the stretcher bearers were seriously wounded. One guy was shot, but it was in a place that is not politically correct to discuss.

[00:59:16.38] MARK FRANKLIN: But survivable.

[00:59:17.40] GEORGE FORREST: Right. And he never-- when we used to go to reunions, we used to laugh at him because of his Purple Heart. He is the only living American guy who got a Purple Heart from being shot in the butt.

[00:59:35.79] [LAUGHTER]

[00:59:44.01] GEORGE FORREST: Second tour, I was the operations officer S-3 for a mechanized infantry battalion. And we had armored personnel carriers-- the old 113s. What a wonderful piece of machinery that was. First of all, because you didn't have to walk. And I'm an infantryman by trade, but I will get a ride whenever I can. OK?

[01:00:17.04] As the operations officer, I worked for a guy who was probably the most outstanding battalion commander that I ever worked for. And his name was McKenzie-- Jack McKenzie. And his famous quote was fish or cut bait, which meant if you couldn't cut the job, then he was going to get rid of you. I survived him because he was tough.

[01:00:46.80] And the mission of the 2nd of the 12th-- or 2nd of the 2nd was to run highway convoys between Lai Khe and An Loc, which ran through the Michelin Rubber Plantation. Now, the rules of engagement were that you can't destroy the rubber because Michelin-- that was their lifeline.

[01:01:23.02] So the VC aren't stupid. They would come out of the rubber, and attack us, and then go back into the rubber until we learned to disobey rules of engagement. This was probably one of the most rewarding tours that I had because I got to plan the operations.

[01:01:50.65] And so we would-- I probably could have lost my job. I said, listen, if they shoot at you, you chase them. I don't care if they go to hell. You get whoever is shooting at you. The rubber is not a safe haven. And so the price of your tires probably increased because of the number of rubber trees that we knocked down with 113s.

[01:02:22.01] [LAUGHS]

[01:02:23.68] MARK FRANKLIN: Any particular memory from that tour that stands out for you?

[01:02:26.92] GEORGE FORREST: Yeah, we had, probably one of the most devastating ones is there was a mountain out in the 9th Infantry Division's area out near Cu Chi. We controlled-- we had communications at the top of that mountain. And we controlled the base. So the VC were in tunnels in the middle of the mountain.

[01:03:00.65] So we worked for a guy who sent us out on an operation. And I can't remember the brigade commander's name who sent us out on a operation and wanted the troops to dismount to assault up the mountain to take out these tunnels.

[01:03:24.98] And I said to him, Colonel, this is a bad idea. We are at a disadvantage. We're off of our fighting vehicles. And we're now ground limited. So we go up that mountain, and we lose about 15 guys, one company commander.

[01:03:51.54] I fly out there, and I said, listen, get back on the tracks, do a retrograde movement, and bring in some artillery. And let's shoot into that mountain. My battalion commander then came in and said, bring your asses home back to the base. That's the worst part of that operation.

[01:04:15.69] But other than that, that was a sweetheart of a unit to be with. And they were a proud unit. We used to do some of the-- and war is kind of like flying an airplane. Boring-- only interrupted by chaos. And Soldiers are really a unique brand of people.

[01:04:45.42] The 113 is an armored vehicle. But the soft part of it is the underbelly. And so rather than riding inside, we would put sandbags in the bed of the M-113s and ride on top. So you would see these guys-- if you ever seen pictures of armored personnel carriers in Vietnam, the guys aren't inside. They're always on top.

[01:05:18.14] And one driver of one of those vehicles figured out if you lose a vehicle to a mine, and you declare combat loss, you can take all of the equipment-- the radios, the machine guns-- the .50-cals-- and take them off and just turn in an empty shell. So what we would do for every vehicle that we would lose, we would take the .50-calibers. So you will see 113s with three .50-caliber machine guns-- an awesome weapon.

[01:05:58.22] MARK FRANKLIN: What year did you go back for your second tour? And what rank were you?

[01:06:02.33] GEORGE FORREST: '67, '68. I had made major.

[01:06:08.30] MARK FRANKLIN: And what was the unit?

[01:06:10.82] GEORGE FORREST: 2nd of the 2nd Mech. 1st Infantry Division.

[01:06:15.89] MARK FRANKLIN: Ah, OK.

[01:06:16.94] GEORGE FORREST: Yeah, 2nd of the 2nd Mech. GEORGE FORREST: In the Cav, we had a South Vietnamese interpreter assigned to each company. When I was in the mech unit, we didn't have a lot of contact with the South Vietnamese. Did some operations with the Koreans and some operation with the Australians.

[01:06:47.27] The Koreans were unbelievable. First of all, the misconception that all people of Asian ancestry are small? This ROK battalion, these guys were big as me and tough as nails. Their first sergeant reminded me of Sergeant Metty.

[01:07:15.46] And Sergeant Metty keeps coming up because he is my ideal of what an NCO should be. And maybe I'm overblowing him, but for me, he taught me everything that I needed to know to survive. And those lessons that I learned from him I overlaid them over my sons. I overlaid those when I was in education. I overlaid that in my football experience. And I overlaid that when I was running county government.

[01:07:52.15] Take care of your people. Give them what they need to succeed. Reward them when they do well. And I call those atta-boys. And when they refuse to change, you give them an aw shucks and show them the way to the door.

[01:08:18.33] GEORGE FORREST: I think they were-- the ones that I had contact with-- they were fighting for survival. And this was cemented for me when we went back to Vietnam in 1993 as part of a ABC TV show called Day One, hosted by Forrest Sawyer.

[01:08:47.18] Now, this is not unusual for Vietnam veterans who go back. But what was unusual about this is that we toured the battlefield with the guys that we had fought with. Now, in order to get there, we had to go to Hanoi. And we were lectured about the great People's Army of South-- North Vietnam, and how we had chased the Americans out, and whatever.

[01:09:17.27] Anyway, when we got to the battlefield, their commanders' concerns were the same as mine-- to protect their troops, get them home safe. I think there's a story that somebody tells about one of the company commanders who, when they left Hanoi-- and by the way, they left Hanoi the same month that we sailed from Charleston-- the unit that we fought on the battlefield.

[01:09:54.57] And this guy was a company commander. And in his unit was a 14-year-old kid who he promised this kid's parents that he would bring this boy home safe. And he lost him on the way along-- somewhere along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. And he lamented that fact, the same as I lament the fact that I lost my guys. He had a would-have should-have moment. And he shared that with us.

[01:10:30.66] When we visited the battle site, the first real concern that I had was we were flown out there in Russian helicopters piloted by North Vietnamese. The gasoline-- the fuel tanks were inside the airplane, and you could smell the gas. And I'm going, I have been home from this war, and I'm going to go down in a crash on a Russian helicopter?

[01:11:09.99] To show you the irony, and why there is-- I am not a religious person, but there is a deity. There is something greater than you and me. We're in the LZ, and a storm comes up. And so half of the group gets to fly out. But the other half, because the birds can't come back in, have to stay overnight in that LZ.

[01:11:40.61] Now, in this group there are some high-ranking North Vietnamese generals. So they send troops-- North Vietnamese troops who were stationed in Cambodia because this perimeter-- this battlefield-- is on the border with Cambodia. And I wake up in the middle of the night. And there is a guy with an AK-47 standing guard over me. I'm going, this cannot be happening. This is too surreal.

[01:12:25.12] GEORGE FORREST: I left my family in Green Bay, Wisconsin. I was on ROTC assignment from the advanced course. I got an ROTC assignment in Green Bay, Wisconsin, only because the PMS at St. Norbert College had tickets to the Green Bay Packers. And at that time, I was a Packer fan.

[01:12:50.05] So when they offered me tickets to go to Green Bay, I said, the only problem with that was there were no African Americans north of Milwaukee other than the guys who played for the Green Bay Packers-- Willie Wood and Ernie Davis and whatever. Anyway, in February after they won the first Super Bowl, the Green Bay Packers-- all the African Americans went



home. And so I'm in the grocery store one day. And a lady comes up to me and said, I thought you went home.

[01:13:31.24] [LAUGHTER]

[01:13:33.31] MARK FRANKLIN: Well, how about you coming home from Vietnam? Talk about that experience. When did you get back and how did you--

[01:13:38.00] GEORGE FORREST: Yeah, the first tour was awful. I mean, we flew into San Francisco. And we were told, before you get off the airplane, get out of your uniforms because you're going to have a hard time in the airport. The second time, I didn't get off the plane in San Francisco and flew straight into Milwaukee. Well, Milwaukee-- guy walking through the airport in a uniform-- no big deal.

[01:14:13.65] But the first time was uncomfortable. But you can look at that in a couple of ways. You know, Vietnam was a terrible time in our political life, social. But what we as Vietnam veterans did was to raise the awareness of the American public so that no returning Soldiers could ever suffer what we suffered.

[01:14:45.95] The governor of Maryland, who is a unique guy-- Larry Hogan-- created a Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans Day every year by legislature that invites-- they have a big reunion, and they bring all these guys home. And the theme is welcome home.

[01:15:13.11] And so by doing what-- by suffering what we suffered, the future generations don't have to. My good friend Joe Galloway-- the mantra that he left me with-- we were not the great generation or the greatest generation, but we were the greatest of our generation.

[01:15:43.17] MARK FRANKLIN: He used to say that a lot.

[01:15:44.76] GEORGE FORREST: Yeah.

[01:15:45.85] MARK FRANKLIN: Do you stay in contact with any of your fellow veterans?

[01:15:49.23] GEORGE FORREST: Yeah, all of my guys. I mean, but as I said to you, the perimeter is getting small. Freddie Owens, who was one of my platoon sergeants-- we used to talk all the time. Some of my troops and a lot of their dependents-- because one of the things that happened to me over the course that helped me-- I used to always worry about the number of guys that I didn't save.

[01:16:33.98] And I was at a reunion once, and a kid came up to me-- about 16 or 17. And he said to me, thank you. And I said, why are you thanking me? He said, my father was in your company during the battle, and he survived. I am here because of what you did to help him survive. And you don't know what that did to beat off some of the demons.

[01:17:09.89] MARK FRANKLIN: Did your experience in Vietnam affect the way you feel about troops coming home off the battlefields today?

[01:17:18.82] GEORGE FORREST: I'm a little envious because I would have loved to have gotten tickets to a Super Bowl or to watch the Washington football club for free. I mean, not that-- I mean, I'm a little envious. But it is what generations do to enhance the ability of the next generation.

[01:17:54.86] There is there is an old African proverb that we stand on the shoulders of the ancestors. And I think that really applies to-- you cannot see a guy in uniform that somebody on the street will go up to him and say thank you for your service. 15 years ago, that would have never happened. And so the Vietnam experience contribution to young veterans today is all the crap that we went through when we got home.

[01:18:44.72] MARK FRANKLIN: How do you think the Vietnam War is remembered?

[01:18:46.88] GEORGE FORREST: I don't think it's remembered. And it's projects like yours, and there is a university, Texas Tech, that has a library where--

[01:19:01.25] MARK FRANKLIN: The Vietnam Center and Archive.

[01:19:02.91] GEORGE FORREST: Right. Without those and without-- because it's not taught in history. And I was a principal of a high school where my kids did not even have a recollection of Vietnam. They knew World War II. They knew Korea. But Vietnam was something that we didn't even talk about.

[01:19:36.29] The three things that you didn't talk about was politics, religion, and Vietnam. But it's changing. I mean, it's programs like this and having-- I mean, you cannot imagine the great feeling that I had yesterday when I walked through the displays down there with that Stetson hat and the jacket that you can see for miles.

[01:20:10.40] The number of people that came up to me and said, thank you for your service. And that's a good feeling for old vets. When I was a kid, I used to wonder-- every Veteran's Day in little small towns, there are Veteran's Day parades. And these old guys would dress up in their World War I and World War II uniforms and hobble down the street. That was me yesterday.

[01:20:49.42] GEORGE FORREST: I went to the Wall. Initially, I thought I didn't like it, because most of the monuments in Washington are in white, pristine marble. And they are above ground where you can see the glory of whatever. But here we are on a black granite Wall underground. And then I met Jan Scruggs. And he totally changed my opinion about that memorial.

[01:21:23.07] And then when they went to the-- added the nurses memorial-- the three Soldiers, one of them who looks like me-- that memorial went to the top of the list of my most visited. I have taken my grandsons there. I have taken my children there. And I took them to the panel where my 17 guys' names are. And so they know how special that place is for me.